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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 000401

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MONTAGNARDS PROTEST IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OVER EASTER WEEKEND

REF: A) HCMC 0391 B) HANOI 1007 C) HCMC 0147

1. (SBU) Summary: ConGen HCMC has spoken with numerous sources in Ho Chi Minh City and the Central Highlands regarding reports of violence during demonstrations by ethnic minority residents ("Montagnards") of Dak Lak and Gia Lai provinces. The demonstrations began early on the morning of Saturday, April 10 (refs A and B), one day after the U.S.-based Montagnard Foundation (MFI) issued a press release declaring that 150,000 Montagnards would undertake nonviolent protests throughout the Central Highlands over the Easter weekend against the GVN's "denial of their freedom to worship Christ" and "ongoing repression against the Montagnards." Absent intervention by the international community, the release warned, the GVN's "repression against the Montagnards will be cruel and bloody." While no individual ConGen source has been able to offer an overall estimate of the number of Montagnards involved in the protests, the numbers they report seem much lower than figures cited by MFI. Accounts relayed by reliable ConGen sources also suggest the protests may have been confined to limited areas. According to religious leaders in HCMC, Dak Lak, and Gia Lai, the unrest over the weekend had "no" effect on Easter celebrations, which went forward as planned in both government recognized and unregistered Protestant churches. Most of Post's Protestant contacts claimed the protests had very little to do with religion, and much more to do with land disputes and economic disparities. End summary.

2. (SBU) A house church pastor, who had just arrived in HCMC from Gia Lai on Monday morning, told Poloff that most of the demonstrations in his area had been confined to Dak Doa District, which stretches approximately 15-60 kilometers from the provincial capital of Pleiku. He said that Saturday morning had been quiet near his home, until reports began to trickle in from neighboring Dak Lak early in the day. Traveling to one of his churches approximately seven kilometers from Dak Doa around noon, he noted sizeable numbers of police and military units setting up razor wire to guard the roads into Pleiku. For most of that afternoon, he observed two military helicopters circling overhead, as ambulances raced back and forth between Dak Doa and the city. Police contacts told him that reinforcements were being sent in from Binh Dinh Province to control the spread of the protests. (One of ConGen's Protestant sources in HCMC noted that 1000 riot police had been flown to Pleiku and Buon Ma Thuot from HCMC as well.) He had heard reports of 50-60 injured in Dak Doa, but had no idea how many of those were police and how many were villagers, or how many Montagnards were involved overall. The pastor had departed Pleiku at about 6:30 p.m. on Sunday. He claimed to have had no problem leaving the city, since the roadblocks ran only in the opposite direction. As of the time he departed Gia Lai, he was aware of no problems faced by recognized or unrecognized Protestant churches in his province.

3. (SBU) The pastor's brother-in-law, who lives in Dak Lak, told the pastor on Saturday that police there were apparently aware of the planned protests by Montagnards over the weekend and had prepared themselves to contain the protesters in their own villages. They had also established roadblocks to divert cars to Nha Trang and Quy Nhon, on the Central coast. He said his friends on the police force told him that they had expected most of the villagers to enter the city via National Highway 14 (connecting HCMC to the south with Gia Lai and Kon Tum to the north), and had been caught off guard when groups of ethnic minorities appeared within a kilometer of the city limits via other routes. The brother-in-law attempted to travel to Pleiku Saturday morning. He was unable to reach Pleiku, normally a four- to five-hour trip, until late in the evening. After arriving in Pleiku, he told the pastor that there were signs of conflict at various points along the way, including abandoned tractors, piles of stones, and some bloodied garments. As far as all of ConGen's contacts were aware, ethnic minority protesters employed only stones in Dak Lak Province, although primitive slingshots were used to increase their effectiveness. The pastor heard rumors of possible small arms in Dak Doa, but had no definitive information.

4. (SBU) The sister of one prominent HCMC pastor with nationwide contacts reported from Buon Ma Thuot that perhaps a thousand ethnic minority males had been detained in makeshift camps outside the city. Females were apparently not detained. She said that police had stopped most of the protesters before they ever reached Buon Ma Thuot, shooting the wheels of the converted tractors often used as transportation in this part of Vietnam. Most of the

protesters appeared to be from rural villages well outside of the provincial capital. She had apparently also heard that police were under orders to refrain from using guns to quell the disturbances. She told her brother that she knew for sure that at least two police had died near Buon Ma Thuot, largely because they were forced to engage the protesters with only clubs at such close range. She and other sources said that the police were fighting the protesters in street clothes, so that it would look as if the clashes were between ethnic minority villagers and their ethnic majority Kinh Vietnamese neighbors, rather than with the government. While the sister decided not to return home to Cu Mgar (just north of the provincial capital) on Saturday, she was able to attend her normal Protestant house church service there on Sunday. At least one pastor in Buon Ma Thuot reported via a HCMC contact that several of his relatives had been detained in Cu Mgar in the aftermath of the protests, but it was unclear exactly why, or whether they were still in detention.

15. (SBU) Anecdotal evidence from business contacts in the region confirmed that the disturbances, while very real and in some cases very violent, did not seem to have spread very widely. Asked about the prospects of bringing a group of foreign tourists to the Central Highlands in the next few days, a government-owned tour operator in Gia Lai said Monday that the most serious incidents had occurred in Dak Lak, although even those were over by Saturday night. Much more limited protests had taken place in Gia Lai, while Kon Tum had been completely quiet. The tour company representative said these protests were much more muted than those in 2001, and that the government was much better prepared this time around. She blamed the protests on the growing gap between rich and poor, noting that most of the protesters had been caught trying to break into stores to loot food. An employee at one of the ConGen's favorite restaurants in Buon Ma Thuot noted that the protests lasted less than a day, and were mostly confined to a single ward of the city. While other groups had tried to come to the city from rural villagers, they were all stopped by the police in their villages, or en route. He thought there had been very little real violence, and was ready to book a table. A businessman with factory interests in Gia Lai was aware of the protests, but thought the government was being much smarter than in 2001, and was looking for ways to avoid direct confrontation. He said that local officials had told business owners that they were responsible for defending their own premises from protesting Montagnards. The businessman had heard stories about one unarmed official being killed by a group of ethnic minority villagers in a remote part of the province, but was unable to estimate the extent of the protests, the level of violence, or the number of casualties.

16. (SBU) Pastors from both government recognized and unregistered churches blamed the unrest in the Central Highlands on Kok Ksor and his Dega followers in Vietnam, with one going so far as to say, "Kok Ksor controls everything." While they were not sure whether or not Dega organizers had recently crossed the border from Cambodia to incite the mostly-poor ethnic minority villagers, many contacts had heard rumors that protesters were offered US\$50 (up to four months earnings or more in the poorer parts of the Central Highlands) to participate, although the money had yet to be paid. One reliable Protestant house church source with good contacts in the Central Highlands told Poloff that many of the Ede leaders who had returned from Cambodia after the 2001 uprisings had told the villagers they could earn money just by fleeing to Cambodia. They also promised resettlement in the U.S. Those stories carried great currency in the economically underdeveloped ethnic minority villages, the contact said. According to his sources in the Central Highlands, Dega organizers had recently contacted many of the villages to tell the residents that if they "made a lot of noise" they would be allowed to resettle in the U.S. While Post's sources uniformly agreed that the Montagnards had valid reasons to protest -- particularly related to confiscation of tribal lands and what the Montagnards viewed as ethnic discrimination in health care, education, and economic opportunity -- they felt the protests had very little to do with religious persecution.

17. (SBU) Comment: It is interesting to note that many ConGen sources came to the same conclusion independently of one another: namely, that the government was much better prepared to deal with ethnic protests this time around than in 2001. There also appeared to be a consensus of opinion that the police had generally attempted to exercise restraint in quelling the protests, at least by their standards. A striking point that emerged from Poloff's conversations with religious contacts, however, was that the protests seemed to have no impact on the ability of both government recognized and unrecognized Protestant house churches -- or Catholic churches, for that matter -- to conduct services on Saturday and Easter Sunday. According to most of these sources, the protests, confined to relatively limited areas to begin with, were over by Saturday in Dak Lak and by Sunday in Pleiku. Pushed for estimates, their numbers of ethnic minority villagers involved ranged in the thousands, not the tens or hundreds of thousands reported by MFI.

18. (SBU) Comment (cont.): Almost none of Post's well-connected sources knew that anything out of the ordinary was going on in those first few hours when fights were purportedly raging

throughout Dak Lak and Gia Lai. In fact, the first many of them heard that there were potential problems in the Central Highlands was when Poloff called them for information. When they followed up with their local church leaders at Poloff's request, they often found that even pastors in Buon Ma Thuot and Pleiku were completely unaware of the protests. One HCMC-based contact, who used to live in Buon Ma Thuot, chalked this up to the very limited contact between urban and rural residents in the Central Highlands, and noted that peoples' awareness often extends only as far as their own immediate living area. This is consistent with ConGenoffs' own experiences during provincial trips, when we are often confounded by local villagers who don't even recognize the name of the very next village only a few kilometers away. Poloff was also surprised to learn how much his HCMC contacts seemed to be relying on the Internet for information on these events, since their own large networks of religious workers in the provinces were not aware of any disturbances. Those contacts attributed this to the lack of affiliation between the Dega communities and their own Protestant congregations.

19. (SBU) Comment (cont.): All of this makes it extremely difficult to determine the accuracy of the many conflicting accounts of these protests. ConGen will continue to follow up with contacts and seek direct access to the affected areas. Even so, it will likely take time to clarify what really happened in the Central Highlands over Easter, and what effect, if any, it will have on the process of "normalization" (ref C) of unregistered Protestant churches there.  
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